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The main aim of this essay is to analyze British documentary coverage of the conflict in Northern Ireland (NI) with a view to assessing whether there are detectable patterns of explanations across the range of output . The argument has been formed in relation to the discourse of 'Media Studies' research. To this end, there are, it seems to me, three key factors to stress by way of introduction.

In the first place, the essay is a work of interpretation. 'Interpreting Northern Ireland'(1) is a highly partial and problematic business. Historiographical accounts (including such contemporary histories as television news) are of course always value laden. It is axiomatic to say that our political and cultural allegiances create 'ways of seeing' the world which predispose analysts of all sorts and in all societies (officially approved history writers, theorists, journalistic and academic commentators, film makers etc.) to regard and use evidence in particular ways. Documentaries, it shall be argued here, are as selective in their approach as fictions. To the extent that questions of definitional authority are involved, it seems only good sense to appraise documentary works as ideological representation.

1. I am referring here to John Whyte's seminal analysis of the mutually hostile 'one-nation', 'two-nation' and 'no-nation' perspectives (1990).

Second, since forms of expression invariably influence the transmission of ideas (and thus the production of meaning), it is vital that analysis of television documentaries be informed by a critical awareness of the formal characteristics of the programmes under consideration. As is the case with the study of written forms, the style of writing and the generic conventions of the discourse under study (e.g. Shakespearean tragedy, the nineteenth century novel, the war poets etc.) will be affected by the outlook of the author and the age in which the work is produced. For this reason it will be important to distinguish between the major types of television reportage in terms of style, attitude and the relationship to authority.

Third, because the meaning of any given work is ultimately socially determined, at the least, the critic has an obligation to consider the cultural formation within which the 'text' is received. Understanding the peculiarities of the decoding context is a doubly urgent task in a conflictual society like NI where there is a general absence of common codes of public communication.

Documentary Realism and the Truth Game

The term documentary is problematic, as is the whole discourse on realism and representation. That film makers as manifestly dissimilar as Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty can with equal merit be claimed as pioneers of the art of documentary film making is indicative of the theoretical and historical complexity of the concept(2). The stylistic differences between Flaherty, Vertov and Riefenstahl are obvious, but what makes them all documentarists? The earliest motion pictures were simple documentaries: workers leaving the Lumière factory; a train arriving at a railway station(3). Both these film fragments are now historic documents. And already the two most common usages of the concept of documentary realism have been introduced: (i) the recording, or documentation, of a real life event 'as it happened'; (ii) the record, or evidence of it having happened. In the first instance, it would seem, the authority of the documentary record rests on the reality of the events recorded by the camera: the categorical requirements of the documentary film is that it can be nonfictional.

2. My key text here is Christopher Williams' documentary digest *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader* (1980).

3. Both *La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'Usine Lumière* and *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare* were screened at the first paying performance of the Lumière programme, Paris, 28 December 1895 (C.W. Ceram, 1965: 149-50).

Where there is a will to 'show things as they really are', cinema and television have an advantage over other representational modes. The actuality of the documentary film is apparently guaranteed by the accuracy of its technical reproduction: the image looks real and therefore is true. Here, in an instant, however, an elision has occurred between the first and second uses of the idea of documentary (the recording/documentation, and the record/evidence). Technical and philosophical senses of 'truthfulness' have collapsed into a tautologous relationship. John Grierson's well known, but self-contradictory, definition of the documentary film is typical. In his esteemed opinion, the 'creative treatment' (position and use of camera, framing, lighting, music, commentary, pace of editing etc.) of actuality is somehow or other rendered transparent (such that 'mechanical reproduction' is believed not to intrude upon or influence the viewers' understanding of what they see).

For analytical purposes, it is vital that we insist on the formal separation of these two senses of documentary truth. The conventions of documentary realism alter through time and from place to place (some methods becoming more naturalized, or dominant, than others), but at the end of the day the common link in film history between documentaries of all description is the overriding ambition to show things as they really are. It is no accident that 'Kino Pravda' and 'Cinéma Verité' both translate into English as cinema truth. Thousands of miles apart in their theory and practice, the distance between Riefenstahl and Vertov is ultimately the distance between two worldviews. It is primarily a question of perspective. The manners and attitude of *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929) are patently at odds with those of *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but the aspiration of both film makers, it cannot be doubted, was to tell the truth as they saw it (limited only by the technological means at their disposal).

More than mere verisimilitude, the aim of the typical documentary realist is to reveal the essence of the subject under study. Yet, depending on the choice of subject matter, of course it cannot always be possible for the film maker 'to be there' (in the technical sense). Let us say for the sake of argument an 'historic' event has occurred without the presence of a film camera (the storming of the Winter Palace in October 1917, for example). Striving to reach the inner truth of it (in the philosophical sense), in these circumstances, the reporter (documentarist) may legitimately choose to dramatize or reconstruct evidence, or use other artificial devices (such as suggestive montage, music, slow motion) while, in principle, remaining loyal to the realist ideal. To this extent, Eisensteinian montage or the Nouvelle Vague can be described as anti-realist methods, but realist in their endeavour to uncover the true nature of their respective objects of enquiry(4). In most cases, the documentary film maker is driven by the ambition and/or belief that in fashioning his/her argument in a documentary manner, the viewer (reader) of the film-text will respond to it as one which is more authoritative, convincing, 'factual' even, than the other types of representation.

In other words, the prime motive force of the documentary enterprise is interpretation of the material. The attitude justifies the means of representation. Thus at the present time there are a range of documentary styles and genres, including various types of poetic realism, historical drama, or drama-documentary (often these are socially realistic, issue-based fictions) that do not comply with the first rule of nonfiction film.

'Sticking to the facts' is not an essential requirement of documentary representation. Over time, as certain stylistic conventions become associated with the documentary project (for instance, high-contrast, black and white photography), the techniques themselves come to signify 'documentaries' (Caughie, 1981). Consequently, although it may not seem a helpful distinction to make at this stage, documentaries need not be nonfictions. On fuller reflection, it is clear that even the first nominally denotative usage of the concept of documentary introduced above (recording/documentation) is predicated upon taking up a position (in the rudimentary sense of assuming a point of view), while the second usage (record/evidence) necessarily involves manufacture. And so, despite the 'naive' claims to the contrary, we must conclude that nonfiction films are always constructed. Representation is not real life. In the last analysis, the 'truthfulness'

4. In this manner, Brecht too was a realist.

'Realism is not a pure question of form. Copying the methods of these realists, we should cease to be realists ourselves ... time flows on ... Methods wear out, stimuli fail. New problems loom up and demand new techniques. Reality alters; to represent it the means of representation must alter too (1974: 110).'

of one film document over another does not depend on the technical accuracy of the apparatus of television. Rather, arguments tend to be settled on the basis of the authority of the reporter — whether institutionally authorized or individually authored.

Towards a typology of documentary coverage

From an analytical standpoint, television journalism has to be appraised apart from documentary coverage of the conflict in NI. Bearing the imprimatur of the broadcast institutions and occupying a sizable chunk of mainstream television, it is inevitable that 'news & current affairs' coverage will closely reflect the prevailing consensus of leading opinion in political society (Schlesinger et al., 1983: 34-69). Similar in scope and purpose to broadsheet Sunday newspaper (in principle analyzing 'the stories behind news'), documentary current affairs series – *Panorama, World in Action, This Week* – follow a news agenda and operate according to journalistic values. Current affairs programmes may thus be categorized as institutional documentaries. This is a basic distinction. Television journalism is constitutionally obliged to be balanced and impartial as between the major interests in the state and society. Conscious all the while of charges of bias, current affairs reportage must aim to achieve a formally neutral, as far as possible styleless, mode of presentation. (It would be more accurate to say they use thoroughly routinized codes of conventions.) In the average current affairs film report the visual track is required to do no more than illustrate the narration. Current affairs documentaries privilege the 'spoken word'. They are more essayistic than filmic in their approach. As with news presentations, ordinarily there is no place in current affairs television for 'symphonic' techniques (the use of suggestive music or symbolic pictorial juxtapositions etc.). 'Death on the Rock' (Thames: 28 April 1988) is a case in point. Due to the obvious sensitivity of the subject matter, the programme makers were at extreme pains to avoid loaded formal devices. 'Death on the Rock' is a stylistically sparse piece. The 'reconstruction' scenes in particular are stripped down to a laborious image-for-word literalness.

Where they appear in the schedules, other non-institutional documentary films (it is an ugly categorization, but has the benefit of being analytically precise) will usually have been commissioned as 'individual' and/or 'artistic' statements. As far as it is helpful to generalize about a diverse range of material, authored documentaries tend to be issue-based and discursive (they all have 'something to say' on a given subject or theme). Authored documentary films make up only a very small, though still prestigious, amount of British television output. The critical point is that they are licensed (even encouraged) to be politically and/or stylistically unconventional. Permitted to represent viewpoints from outside the mainstream of current affairs television, in a manner that is formally arresting, this group of films can be further subdivided between essayist and 'poetic' approaches (the former usually made by campaigning journalists or notable polemicists and the latter by politically committed film makers, or others from an 'art' background). (See Table 1)

Reporting the conflict: the good, the bad & the ugly

Three years prior to 'Death on the Rock', the postponement and eventual broadcast of *Real Lives*, 'At the Edge of the Union' (due to be shown in July, the film went out in October 1985) managed to generate a political controversy of even larger dimension. In a manner analogous to the transmission of the 'Question of Ulster' in early 1972, both these films have had far reaching effects on the broadcasting organizations' relationship to the state power. Stylistically, though, they are quite different animals. Planned as one of six of a series, 'At the Edge of the Union' is an authored documentary. The 'preferred reading' of Paul Hamann's film is contained in the introductory voiceover. As the camera tracks across a graveyard (signifying 'timelessness' and referencing back to previous documentaries about the NI conflict) we are informed:

TABLE 1
A Naming of Parts

All documentary representation is in some sense evidential. All documentary modes (including documentary-drama and dramatized reconstruction) use film-evidence as a means of authorizing the documentarist's point-of-view (the *technical* veracity of the mechanical reproduction of real life events is believed to legitimize a *philosophical* sense of 'documentary truth').

Defined this way, in terms of a common *attitude*, the documentary project may be characterized as an ambition 'to show things as they really are' (Williams, R. 1983: 257-62).

On this basis we may say that the *style* of documentary films tends to vary between:

DIRECT MODE OF ADDRESS (MOA)	INDIRECT MODE OF ADDRESS
Where commentary acts as the organizer of all other discursive elements in the text	Where film-evidence appears to 'speak for itself (i.e. the subject is apparently unaware of being filmed)
Commentary may take various forms: descriptive; lyrical; argumentative etc.	Mise-en-scène and montage are charged with responsibility for ordering and signifying the production of meaning.

For analytical purposes, it is possible to identify two major types of documentary reportage. These are:

FILM-ESSAY	FILM-POEM
Primarily Direct MOA	Primarily indirect MOA (where there is narration it will be of a lyrical nature)
Expositional	Evocative
Didactic: Argument and evidence marshalled in 'quasi-tautological' relationships to maximize pedagogic impact.	'Symphonic': Auditory-visual material orchestrated towards an 'apotheosis of form' *(Spottiswoode, 1950: 281)*

The purpose and formal properties of institutional and non-institutional documentaries are quite different:

NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS TELEVISION	FEATURES DOCUMENTARIES
Institutionally authorized	'Individually' authored
Event based (follows news agenda)	Issue based/discursive
Journalistic/primacy of 'spoken word'	Filmic/visual values
Central to TV schedules	Marginal
Reflective of dominant opinion	Licensed to be provocative
Stylistically neutral: image-for-word	Style and /or Attitude

> The city of Londonderry is where the present Northern Ireland troubles began sixteen years ago. It is an increasingly polarized city with public support for the extremes on both sides. This film looks at those extremes through the eyes of two men. Both young working class, teetotal, church going, elected representatives, members of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The key phrases here are: the present NI troubles (by concentrating on the internal dimensions of the conflict, the author exonerates the British role); increasingly polarized (the 'problem' exists because there is no British style middle ground); consequently support grows for the extremes on both sides (both men are consigned to a place outside the parameters of reason and 'responsibility', they are equally extreme in their views and equidistant from moderate opinion); through the eyes of two men (the category of the individual is to be the model of explanation).

'At the Edge of the Union' is impeccably 'balanced'. More than that, the film is rigidly symmetrical. Each scene highlighting McGuinness's perspective is matched by a comparable sequence representing Campbell's. But although Gregory Campbell makes more allusions to the use of violence than Martin McGuinness, when Lady Faulkner condemned the programme for the way it 'sanitized terrorism', and Leon Brittain complained it was a 'succour to terrorism', both were expressing alarm at McGuinness's presence in the film. The 'minor amendments' of which Alisdair Milne spoke were intended to rebalance it, against McGuinness. Of the changes made, the insertion of twenty seconds or so of library film showing scenes of carnage and destruction wrought by an IRA bomb (Bloody Friday, 21 July 1972) into the midst of a scene of McGuinness in a domestic setting, is by far the most significant addition. For the governors and the government, the 'humanizing' of McGuinness was objectionable because of the special ideological purchase of 'ordinary family man', and points up the film's central dilemma. McGuinness's home environment is comfortably domestic. He is seen to be 'of his community'. Walking unmolested amongst them, he drives his own car and plays on the beach with the children.

Campbell on the other hand is static and confined, incarcerated in his fortress home. Seemingly obsessed with denouncing McGuinness, he speaks darkly of 'dealing with' republicans. McGuinness, by contrast, makes no reference to Campbell whatsoever. Limiting his comments to attacking what he considers the signal cause of conflict, the British state in Ireland, Ulster Unionism is notable only by its absence from his analysis. Overall, on the basis of the content of the programme, it is Campbell who appears the more 'extreme' of the two men. By inviting comparison between the merits and demerits of two men the film reduces the ideologies they stand for to an emblematic contrast between their personal attributes. Though probably more by accident than design, in balancing Campbell's vitriolic brand of politics with McGuinness, in part at least, the film undermines the intended blackguarding of McGuinness. The film's main failing, then, from officialdom's point of view, was not how it dealt with McGuinness, but that it dealt with him at all. In its earnest (and patronizing) endeavour to lay bare the tragic irony of the symmetry between loyalism and republicanism, the film admitted a point of view normally excluded from the realms of reasonable opinion.

The contemplative approach of 'At the Edge of the Union' has long since been banished from current affairs television. In all likelihood, had the programme been subject to the procedures routinely applied to BBC analysis programmes – *Panorama*, or *On the Record* – it has to be doubted the idea would have progressed beyond the commissioning stage (the whole point of the reference-up process is to head off potential problems). Resulting from twenty years of voluntarism, capitulation and latterly outright censorship, like the imprint of a stubborn stain, British reportage has become ingrained with stereotypical themes and motifs. Foremost amongst these, it is virtually obligatory for any programme proposing to be sceptical of government policy to begin by decrying IRA terrorism as the cause of the conflict. The lengthening of 'Death on the Rock' to a forty-five minute slot from *This Week's* customary twenty-seven minutes was

unquestionably due to the company's urgent concern to underline the 'hostile editorial stance of the programme towards the IRA and its methods' (Windlesham, 1989: 24).

The broadcast media's hypnotic obsession with IRA violence has skewed the terms of representation in particular ways. Television journalism takes it for granted that Britain is a disinterested party, acting in the role of honest broker. In this way, protestants and catholics are cast as morally equivalent, equally anachronistic 'warring tribes'. The British state's activity in Ireland is not seen to be an aspect of the problem. Due also to the overwhelming concentration on republican terror, unionism and loyalism (including loyalist violence) have commanded only the passing interest of British journalism (Butler, 1991). The attitude towards Gregory Campbell in 'At the Edge of the Union' is fairly typical of the syllogistic logic underscoring British coverage of NI: McGuinness is to blame; Campbell is equivalent to McGuinness; Campbell is also to blame. Increasingly, since the onset of 'the Troubles', this dominant modality elides representation of the conflict into continual re-runs of the Good (British arbitration), The Bad (Sinn Fein and the IRA), and (in a supporting role) The Ugly (Paisley et al.).

In current affairs television, as a matter of rote, republicanism is demonized and cast out. Now and again, however, British broadcasting has (for specific reasons) permitted an airing of alternative and, occasionally, oppositional perspectives on Ireland. It would be a mistake to expect these films to be automatically less rigid in their style and attitude than conventional journalistic material. Indeed, odd as it may seem, for the most part, British leftist analyses of Ireland have tended to reproduce the dominant mode of reasoning. The 'socialist' syllogism functions as follows: a residual British 'imperialism' is the source of the problem; unionists represent (as agents, dupes or infidels) the colonial legacy; unionism/ loyalism is the problem. From here it is a short step to the conclusion that since 'the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland' (socialist advance is coterminous with nationalist ambition), loyalist working class opposition is irrational, ill-founded and, as a result, can be seen to be a false consciousness.

A passionate advocate of the rights of 'oppressed' minorities, Mike Grigsby is a documentary film maker of the highest renown. His naturalistic style of directing sharply illustrates the paradoxical nature of the documentary enterprise. On the one hand his work is self referentially non-interventionist. It claims (in Griersonian fashion) to let the material 'speak for itself'(5). The principal guarantee of this supposed veracity is the indirect manner of filming, the use of especially long long-takes, and static, tableaux camera set-ups. Yet, at the same time, Grigsby is a supremely accomplished manipulator of the form. He is particularly adept at over dubbing images to stress preferred meanings. In his film 'The Silent War' (1990) for C4's documentary series *True Stories*, there is a scene centred on the journalistic coverage of the burial of a young catholic man killed by a plastic baton round in Belfast. Grigsby's camera is situated at a distance from the tidy council house from which the coffin will soon appear. Milling around, chatting to one another, is a large contingent of newspaper and broadcast journalists. As the pall bearers raise the coffin up, the reporters and photographers crowd in preventing the cortege from moving off. All the while Grigsby's camera is still, observing the undignified scramble. The click and whir of automatic cameras is overwhelmingly loud. The sequence ends on a long-view of the house, deserted now, a black flag flutters. At this point a tannoy announcement of the departure of the British Airways flight to London sequels to a shot of the airplane high in the sky, arching off into the distance.

'The Silent War' is a consummate, if repetitive, film-poem, made in a manner strongly reminiscent of the best work of Humphrey Jennings. The themes and techniques are by now quite familiar. Without knowing for certain, I would be prepared to wager that the soundtrack of the intrusive cameras has been heightened, much in the way that a montage sequence in an earlier work 'Too Long a Sacrifice' (Central, 1984) opens with the resounding crunch of a British soldier's boot, disturbing a flock of birds. The point made by these sound-image montages is clear enough, in a word, *invasion*. In spite of the naturalist filming and the conspicuous absence of journalistic codes (especially

5. Grigsby seems unaware of the self-contradictory relation between the choice of a self-reflexively naturalist style of film making and a politically committed attitude. The paradox is ably demonstrated in the following quotations: 'I think that television has a tendency to swamp many of its films with reporters' questions and with a commentary, with a result that one is never allowed to feel, one is unable to breathe, and one is being led all the time as an audience; one is not being allowed to draw one's own conclusion from the material that is there in front of you because the commentator is there between you and the subject, actually telling you what to think.But it is important that one really tries to let people be what they are, and to come across in a way they want to come across, and we as film-makers should not impose our attitudes in commentary or voice-over on other people. One has to take a side. As a film-maker one has to identify with one situation, one issue,one group of people. As a film-maker you have to take a stand and say, this is the film I want to make, these are the situations I want to identify with, these are the issues that concern me, and go in a straight line and do it. So yes, of course, this is a political issue'. In interview with Julian Petley (1981).

commentary), Grigsby's films are no less directed towards a particular interpretation than any other cited here. It is arguable, indeed, that because his viewpoint is embedded in the grammar of the film (at a metalinguistic level, so to speak), the authorial message is all the more convincing.

David Fox is an Irish documentary film-maker bedded in an 'anti-treaty' tradition. His films, like Grigsby's are stylistically indebted to the British documentary films of the 1930s and 40s. And like 'The Silent War', Fox's 'Trouble the Calm' (1989) ably points up the paradox of documentary realism. Fox is a picturist. His work is expertly crafted.'Trouble the Calm' is organized around a succession of striking visual patterns and allegories, so much so that the film lacks narrative coherence. His thesis simply put, is that while the Republic wholeheartedly embraces multinational capital, it ignores and represses the inheritors of the true republican tradition in contemporary Ireland. Worse still, in his opinion, the Irish government connives with Britain to extradite republican prisoners to stand trial in NI.

One scene, in particular, forcefully demonstrates his attitude and technique. At the Bodenstown Easter commemoration recalling the heroic deeds of Ireland's 'soldiers of destiny', the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, is giving the annual oration at the graveside of Wolfe Tone. Fox has a point to make. All but hidden from view by the assembled crowd of listeners, Haughey boasts of Ireland's rapid economic integration into the world economy. Positioned at considerable distance from the gathering, the camera tracks around the scene. Though visually diminutive, Haughey's words are clearly audible, interrupted only by a dull rhythmic thud on the soundtrack. As the speech progresses and the camera's graceful arc takes us further away from the scene, there are a series of cutaways to a gang of labourers digging a grave. They pause, look up, seem to listen for a second, then continue with their work, apparently unimpressed. The irony of the sequence is delicious. Rarely could a metaphor have been more vividly rendered: 'capitalism is its own gravedigger'. When questioned about the construction of the scene (at a screening of the film at the University of Ulster at Coleraine), Fox confirmed that the two sets of actions had not occurred contemporaneously. He only had one camera operator at his disposal. But this wilful manipulation of the material is not at all mendacious (his company is called Faction Films). Fox is doing no more than endeavouring 'to show things as they really are', to tell the truth as he sees it. Within the discourse of documentary realism, where argument ultimately legitimates the formal presentation of film evidence, the use of this evocative device is therefore perfectly acceptable as nonfictional representation.

There is, I am suggesting, a detectable undercurrent of syllogistic reasoning in British attitudes to NI – in the mainstream and alternative reportage – which produces particular ideological effects. At the periphery, due primarily to the romantic 'anti-imperialist' imagination of a section of the British left, in recent years there have been a few independently produced television documentaries presenting a 'Troops Out' critique (most recently, Geoff Bell's 'Pack Up Your Troubles' (C4, 1992).

In contrast the cause of Ulster Unionism has singularly failed to inspire valorizing documentary treatments. This is an intriguing question: why is it that loyalism cannot excite the passionate advocacy of a political film maker of the stature and expertise of Michael Grigsby or David Fox? The explanation, I think, lies in the peculiar nature of loyalists' image problem in the British media. The politics of loyalism are not readily defensible within the limits of contemporary political discourse. Tom Paulin:

> If you were to take the cultural cringe factor in terms of Britain's view of the loyalists ... there is this detestation because it reminds so many British people of what they thought they had put behind them, or what they've suppressed under illusions of gentility and decency ... It is important to remember ... loyalism represents ... a kind of parody of British imperialism. It uses certain imperialist insignia and it seeks to enshrine the imperialist mission in certain images (6).

6. Cited in 'Imagined Communities', a television documentary in C4's off-beat *Without Walls* arts strand based on Benedict Anderson's classic text by the same name.

And although there have been a couple of attempts to counter loyalism's generically negative identification, these have, by and large, tended to be defensive and apologetic explanations rather than robust political arguments in favour of their case. Sympathetic treatments of loyalism, even those originating in the local context, tend not to take a directly political form. Operating from a base within the independent sector, John T. Davis has now produced a body of stylish and enigmatic portraits of aspects of the religion and cultural life of Ulster protestants. 'Power in the Blood' (1989) was commissioned for BBC2's prestige arts documentary series *Arena*. The film follows Vernon Oxford's 'healing mission' from his home in Franklin, Tennessee to NI. Oxford is an old-time country singer and fundamentalist preacher. Along the way he ministers to a huge throng of enthusiastic born-again christians, sings in a loyalist drinking club on the Shankill road, mixes freely with evangelical street singers on the *Eleventh Night* (11 July) in Sandy Row, ventures south of the border, where he saves a few souls by means of the 'laying on of hands', preaches in Darkley Pentecostal Hall, rounding off with an emotional visit to his friend, and convicted murder, Wilfie Cummings, at the Maze Prison.

The film brims with unsettling and strikingly asymmetrical compositions, long takes, and gazing, indeed voyeuristic, camera movement. The film has no other narration than Vernon Oxford's conversations, personal reflections, his music, and one or two informational captions. Whatever message (intentional or otherwise) the film contains is conveyed indirectly. On one level, it could reasonably be argued, that by handling them in a 'modish, technically perfect way', the film transforms these troubling incidents 'into an object of enjoyment' (Benjamin, 1982: 24), thereby sanitizing their political meaning. The absence of commentary would seem to confirm, like the dog that would not bark, that Davis's film wishes to avoid analyzing the sectarian content of the material by not addressing it directly.

The suspicion appears to be borne out by the promotional literature. Claiming that the film faithfully portrays features of protestant working class life routinely 'under-represented, if not misrepresented, by the media', we are told that:

> 'Power in the Blood' is a film about them, and the way they look at the world. It observes them with candour and sympathy; it shows them in their colours – more various and rich than the standards of red, white and blue.

Here, yet again, is the realist index, the ambition to reveal the truth. One has to wonder, though, whether the writer of this description is talking out of the side of his or her mouth. For despite the ostensible sympathies, the effect of the filming is anything but flattering. To take one typical scene, Oxford is preaching to a jam-packed gathering in what appears to be a converted cinema. Holding a bible close to this face, he repeats an elementary phrase in the manner of a crude incantation (not unlike the phrasing of a Van Morrison song). Oxford wears narrow reading glasses. Perspiring heavily, his face is contorted. He is filmed from an acute low angle, in big close-up. Due to the dim red theatrical lighting in the hall, and because of the way his glasses – perched low on his nose reflect the light, his eyes look positively demonic.

As politicians, photographers and cinema-goers know full well, to position a camera low beneath a subject is to invite connotations of 'monstrousness', indicating, at the least, 'this is a sinister or dubious character'. I am bound to say that the framing of this and other scenes do not suggest this film – and even more so its companion piece 'Dust on the Bible' (DBA for C4,1980) – is uncritically sympathetic towards Ulster protestantism. On mature reflection, 'Power in the Blood' is an ambivalent, double-coded text; probably deliberately so. Adapting Godard's maxim to the discourse of documentary representations of NI, though not a directly political film-essay, 'Power in the Blood' has been made politically, with awareness of the meaningfulness of the form. (7).

7. One of the slogans of the Dziga Vertov group: 'The problem is not to make political films but to make them politically' (cited in MacCabe, 1980: 19). I am not suggesting that Davis (or DBA) shares Godard's ultra-left avantgardism, only that the po-faced claims of the promotional literature to represent protestants in their 'true colours', may be a double code. It is difficult to see how a film-maker of Davis's obvious mastery could not be conscious of the damning connotations of some of the images in his film.

The peculiarities of the local formation

The logical contradictions of David Hammond's 'Steel Chest, Nail in the Boot, and the Barking Dog' (Flying Fox Films for C4 1987) arise more from the attitude than the style of film making. The recipient of the major prize at the Celtic Film Festival the year before, this too is a lyrical 'features documentary'. In the opening sequence an inter-title announces the film 'A Story of the People, told by the People'. In the first instance 'Steel Chest' thus represents itself as a WEA-type (Workers' Education Association –eds.) 'oral history' project. Hammond's film is an affectionate portrayal of authentic working class community and a celebration of collective labour, but the 'of/by' frame of reference, laying claim to formal transparency, is untenable. The artifice is not all unobtrusive. On the contrary, the film's technical presentation has been elaborately and lovingly fashioned. Its approach is a long way from the gritty social realism more usually associated with documentary depiction of working class life. 'Steel Chest' is neither in the 'problem solving' or story-documentary mode. Made up of an accumulation of interviews with present and former employees of the Harland & Wolff shipyard, ordered by a quasi-poetical narration, ethereal music and richly photographed (by David Barker, who also photographed 'Power in the Blood'), slowly paced, rhythmic montage, it is more in the manner of a nostalgic evocation. Contained here are accounts of gruesome industrial injuries and life-shortening working conditions, yet the interviews focus on the men's fond memories of comradeship as expressed in terms of their recollections of nicknames (providing the film title).

One result of this anecdotal framework is that the film ignores capital-labour relations and, significantly in a television documentary addressing the labour history of the Belfast shipyard, by looking at practices in a romanticized way, avoids the thorny question of sectarianism in the workplace. Remembering all the while that civil society in NI is highly politicized, the net effect of introducing 'aesthetics into political life' (Benjamin, 1973: 243) is to render the protestant workforce politically unproblematic and psychologically inoffensive.

It is quite likely that the film's resounding silence on the exclusivist traditions of the Harland & Wolff yard gave rise to more than a little scepticism among northern viewers. In essence, Hammond's film promotes a folkloric thesis, stressing the organic integrity of working class community and culture (demonstrated by the supportive role of women and children and by the performance of traditional shanty songs), thereby implicitly countering the routine nationalist jibe that unionists have no culture. However, when scrutinized in the fraught dissensual circumstances of civil and political life in NI, in other respects 'Steel Chest' lends itself to a one-nation interpretation. In NI 'folk' customs do not inhabit a neutrally 'civic' and secularized public sphere.

On the contrary, culture in NI is sectarian. The folk tradition is intrinsic to the nationalist discourse. In the main, whether everyday users think it or not, the 'Irish' language, music, sports, dance and other 'traditional' arts act as the ideological cement of an exclusive cultural nationalism. Ulster protestants are either viewed hostilely, as intruders, 'planters' without a claim to the territory they presently occupy and without an identity of their own, or benignly, as the dupes of English colonialism who continue to misrecognize their true identity. Neither model (including nominally 'pluralist' versions), acknowledge legitimate cultural difference. In this mode of thinking loyalist antipathy to 'gaelic' forms is held to be evidence of their rootlessness, while non-catholics who demonstrate interest or expertise in 'folk' idioms are taken to be expressing their (thirty-two county) Irishness.

To some, my analysis of 'Steel Chest' will appear cynical and, perhaps, aberrant. The key surely, as John Keane notes, is that we are all 'situated interpreters'; we (the producers, consumers and theorists of the media) may well make our own historical readings, but not in circumstances of our choosing (1991: 38). In recent years the recognition that meaning is arrived at via what John Tomlinson (1991: 49–50) calls 'a social process of viewing and discursive interpretation', and that crucially,

> audiences are more active and critical, their responses more complex and reflective, and their cultural values more resistant to manipulation and 'invasion' than many critical media theorists have assumed

has transformed media research in these islands. Tomlinson's cautionary observations are especially apt here in NI, where every element of cultural production is carefully interrogated for undeclared intentions; where, in short, every signifier is spoken for. The stark reality of it is that in the Northern Irish context it is irrelevant to speak of 'common ground' (Goldring, 1991: 144-63). Just as the designations of left and right-wing, as traditionally understood, are inapplicable, in NI there can be no neutral language, verbal or visual, no uncontested images, and certainly no unifying imagery. Intentionally or other-wise, in proposing a vaguely folkloric thesis and by emitting other contradictory signals, Hammond's text promotes an irredentist reading.

The interpretation of 'Steel Chest' suggested here is not available outside the local configuration, nor is it a subliminal Trojan horse, rather it is an emblematic illustration of the absence of agreed codes and of the co-existence of mutually hostile perspectives in NI. Alongside the implacable 'siege mentality' of the unionist zeitgeist, the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' attitude of cultural nationalism (described above) frustrates the emergence of feasibly non-sectarian forms in cultural expression. In the last instance, moreover, the petrification of history and culture in NI accounts for the staleness and predictability of iconography of the Troubles.

In general, coverage of NI display a depressing dependence on second-hand motifs, visual and thematic, which mars all but the most painstaking and imaginative representations. And this is also the root of the problem for broadcasters, the makers of fiction and documentary films and academic analysts alike: how does one go about representing 'culture and identity in NI' in ways which avoid depoliticizing their seamier aspects while at the same time not falling into the trap of reliance on cliché (8)?

8. This and other questions were discussed at the Cultural Traditions symposium held at the University of Ulster at Coleraine, 21 February 1991 (see McLoone, 1991).

A case in point is the documentary report 'Parallel Lines' made for BBC2's community access slot *Open Space* in 1987. This short film is of critical interest precisely because it sets itself the aim of resisting the conventional iconography of the Troubles. Despite an ostensibly 'non-professional' status, the programme is presenter-led, employs a full crew and has high production values (notably the photography of David Barker, again). Like 'At the Edge of the Union' the film uses the bipolar format. The purpose, we are told in the opening segment, is to take 'a look at the two identities... that exist here' through the eyes of 'two young people from Belfast'.

The young people concerned (both university students, a protestant unionist male and a catholic nationalist female), are apparently very keen to get away from the normal stereotypical image that is portrayed here. They've got ideas of where they'd like to film and places they'd like to go. It is significant therefore that contrary to this laudable ambition, the film finds itself reusing the very same visual and thematic stereotypes which, we were assured, it was determined to avoid. Given the power over their own image, she locates herself in the countryside, amidst ancient ruins, pictured by a drystone wall and silhouetted against a scene of bucolic beauty(9). Invoking the traditional nationalist myth of longevity ('the dead generations'), she speaks of 'thousands of years' of uninterrupted nationalist culture. He, equally true to form, claims industrial Belfast and the City Hall. And on this occasion when the Orange band appears, as appear they must in a film wishing to explain culture, is it an accident that they are out of uniform (as if mufti softens the conventionally negative referent)? Not only are all the signifiers spoken for, but like Ulster's politicians these young protagonists are unable to find a semiologically neutral location in which to meet. Their discourse, hostile and at cross purposes is filmed as they sit in the backseat of a car speeding around Belfast's trouble spots. The only other point at which their paths converge is under an emblematic umbrella in the film's title sequence. To its great credit the film refuses an integrationalist closure. The parallel lines they represent, we may reasonably deduce, run side by side, but never meet.

9. The enduring significance of the iconography of the country/city divide in cinematic depictions of Ireland (where the countryside is represented as an 'escape from modernity') is analyzed in depth by Luke Gibbons in his section of *Cinema and Ireland* (1987 194-249).

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